NEWS

What do you know about Winchester's school councils?

CHRIS STEVENS | CORRESPONDENT

January 5, 2026 . 6:00 AM — 3 min read

Vinson-Owen Elementary School parents recently spoke at a School Committee meeting to support school councils across the town. Parents advocated for more awareness being brought to the councils. WINCHESTER NEWS FILE PHOTO

Parents show up to School Committee to support school councils

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Erica Walsh was a Vinson-Owen Elementary School parent for four years before she realized there was a school council.

"It wasn't until last year that a fellow parent mentioned to me and explained that we can attend," she said. "It was really eye opening and it was very cool to see that this is a meaningful vehicle for the improvement of our schools."

Walsh was one of several parents to attend the year end School Committee meeting in the hopes of spreading the word about the importance of school councils.

According to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, school councils have four major areas of responsibility — they are to assist principals in:

• Adopting educational goals for the school that are consistent with local educational policies and statewide student performance standards;

• Identifying the educational needs of students attending the school;

• Reviewing the annual school building budget; and

• Formulating a school improvement plan.

Walsh said she was surprised to find out that they are also something that parents can participate in. She said she's grateful that under Principal Kathleen Caron, the council meetings are posted, parents have been welcome to attend and "they've been informative."

Katie O'Connor has four kids in Winchester Public Schools and like Walsh only learned recently that school councils existed.

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"Since I learned of the school council last year, I've had a very positive experience with the institution," she said. "I attended meetings and made public comments expressing our concern around the amount of time our children spend learning on screens at school."

O'Connor said she, along with other parents, is worried that time on Chromebooks could negatively impact focus and deep learning, but that having the chance to address the issue at school council meetings was worthwhile.

"But now, I guess my question is, once we have that bullet point on the plan, what happens next," she asked.

O'Connor said she worried that parents don't have an awareness of school councils as an important way for them to participate in the governance of the schools.

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Alexis D'Arcy agreed. Nearing the end of a two-year term on the VO School Council, D'Arcy is well versed on school councils, but asked if the district would consider holding an educational session for parents who might not be.

"I think that could be a very well attended meeting and a great resource for our community if parents have an awareness of school councils and understand their value, I believe they can be a very effective means of improving our schools to ensure that each student is given the chance to reach their highest potential," she said.

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This was not the first time D'Arcy had spoken on the importance of school councils. During a meeting in early December 2025, D'Arcy reminded the committee that one of the things the Collaborative For Educational Services report on the state of early literacy in WPS focused on was shame.

"This idea that parents and teachers had issues and problems with the curriculum that they wanted to raise, and they didn't feel that they had a venue to raise those concerns," D'Arcy explained. "I feel that the school council is the obvious antidote to that shame. I feel that it's a place where teachers and parents can get together and vet and have meaningful dialog about challenges that the schools are facing and that families are facing."

During the final meeting of 2025, D'Arcy asked the School Committee to reflect on the best ways to nurture the district's eight school councils.

Walsh also said she hoped school councils might take a more thoughtful and thorough approach to school improvement plans, which would lead to stronger collaboration.

Parent Greg Bilton said he would urge the committee to revise the policy to be consistent with what mass law requires, "no more, no less." He said he understands a policy can be aspirational, but a policy that is too robust could be problematic.

The committee did in fact update the policy later in the meeting to, as Chair Karen Maruyama Bolognese said, bring the policy in line with what is currently in the Massachusetts Association of School Committee's 2022 update and include a recommendation from DESE regarding the number of times the school council's should meet.

Chris Stevens is an award-winning journalist who has spent 25 years chasing, editing and photographing stories on the North Shore. She is the co-fo managing editor of Gotta Know Medford.

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